

The Creation of God

A comparative study of religion.

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Chapter 1.

Religion: a first approach.

Do you think you can take over the universe and improve it?

I do not believe it can be done. (Lao Tsu: Tao Te Ching).

1. Religion, evolution and imagination.

Human beings are constantly confronted with overwhelming order in the world: the cycle of day and night, the unerring concatenation of the seasons, the processes of birth, growth, adulthood, old age and death in precisely that order. Occasionally something unexpected or 'unorderly' happens: someone drifts into a coma, or seems to awaken 'out of death', a storm devastates the meticulous work of generations, or an individual person proves able to predict or foretell what nobody can expect.

Dreams seem to give us access to a world with so-called counternatural things: in a dream one can fly like a bird, one can change in body and soul, or one can become young again. Different religions focus on the manipulation of dreams. Others alter one's heartbeat or one's body temperature by mere respiration techniques. Poisonous substances are consumed during rituals without fatal effects, and people get visions while in trance. In the western attitude of the past hundred years or so we have learned to draw a sharp line to demarcate so-called dependable knowledge (mostly the modernist instrumental rationality as in science and technology) from belief or religion. Mostly in the wake of christian dualism, I think, we drew an official and politically sanctioned line between knowledge and religion. However, we sometimes cross the line, and invest in somewhat religious expectations about the dependability and problem solving power of science. In other words, we sometimes project our needs for safety and certainty from the religious way into the fallible endeavor of science and technology. On the other hand, the relative range of one and the other way is debated: e.g., the christian cosmologist Max Wildiers (1977) states that religion should be totally separated from cosmology (and science in general), while presentday colleagues of his start to rediscuss the place of God in a theory of the universe (Hawking, 1992 to name one). Still another line of approach is to invite young social scientific disciplines like psychology, sociology and anthropology to shed their light on the religious complex and describe it as a particular category of psychological, social or cultural phenomena. In that endeavor the insights of the social scientist are assessed by religious people as dealing only with superficial aspects of religion and paasing by the more intrinsic ones. That is to say, one accepts that the form of organization and communication of religion, or even the

psychological processes of the believer can be described adequately by the scientist, but that the core or essence of religion is ultimately beyond scientific investigation. This critique is nonsensical if it claims that religion is necessarily or intrinsically beyond research. It is recognizable as stemming from a particular line of philosophy which resorts in the typical essentialistic category (like Heidegger and followers) where the 'essence' of religion is claimed to be beyond the reach of science. Whether or not an essence exists is irrelevant for this discussion, but the study of essences is not what science is about. In *Differentia 0* I explain what view of science I defend and how the status and the function of science relates to those of religion for me.

The distinction between religion and science does not solve all our problems, however. I already pointed to dreams, but there is more. All knowledge, including scientific knowledge, rests on or is inspired by intuitions. That is to say, prior to discursive knowledge are direct and prerational insights about the world. For example, the deep conviction in the western tradition that everything can be seen and thought of as if from the outside, is a very powerful intuition in the West. We share the intuition of the 'God's eye view', that is to say, we look upon things, people, the earth and indeed the whole universe as if we were able to take the point of view of the only outsider, that is God (in our tradition). We have the conviction we can mentally position ourselves alongside Him and 'look over his shoulders' to the world and ourselves. Of course, this need not be a universal human intuition. In fact, anthropologists know that this intuition is rather specific for our tradition. Nevertheless, it plays a crucial role in our knowledge system, even though we cannot really grasp it. Similar critical remarks can be made about other such deep or pervasive notions in the knowledge process. Take consciousness, for example. Western psychology distinguishes between the mental and the physiological, even in the organization of research (the first belongs to the social sciences, and the second to the medical or the natural sciences). Within the realm of the mental a variety of layers is indicated by conscious, preconscious, subconscious, eventually supplemented by the soul or conscience. The Japanese or Hindu seem to reject this complex radically by substituting it with a synthetic notion of 'bodymind' (Shaner, 1989, Roland, 1989). In doing so, the very realm of knowledge and that of religion may be subject to radically different organization and functioning. Then what are we discussing when we study 'religion' around the world? How are we going to compare what seems incomparable at first sight? My approach will be to study the religious

phenomena from the point of view of the study of human beings. In a first step I focus on the human species.

1. Within the frame of evolutionism I claim that the human species is distinct from other species in particular features. What strikes me with regard to religion (as well as knowledge and art) and what I give the status of a postulate in my approach is that, to my knowledge, the human species is the only one which is capable of imagination. In other words: the members of this species can fantasize and represent reality in a way that differs from what is perceived or experienced, and construe action schemes, concepts and values on the basis of that imagining. Some animal species can imitate what they borrow from others (e.g., the parrot can imitate sounds), and some can simulate (as in the mimicry of theameleon). But as far as we know only human beings can say or pretend anything at all, deny blatant or inescapable realities, change the view of his own past, imagine beings that just cannot exist and organize social life according to that imagining. This peculiar capacity makes the species unique, I think. With the postulate of such a capacity art can be understood as the adding of form beyond graspable reality. But also knowledge needs this capacity to grow into large world views and scientific constructs. In my view religion must be appreciated within that frame too: people act in nonfunctional or non-instrumental ways, beyond direct or foreseeable survival value, for instance. E.g., a catholic priest eats a piece of bread and believes that it is, in a symbolical way, the body of Christ. Of course, this is not anthropophagy, neither is it an ordinary meal. This is a symbolic act, meaning that the ordinary acts of the performance acquire a different function, content or sense through the imagination process. In language too, we are creative in this particular way: e.g., the Navajo Indian performs a ceremony and repeats a particular formula four times. Sometimes four colors are named, sometimes the four cardinal directions are mentioned in the sequel, or sometimes four forces in nature are pointed at. The quadruple form of the verbal message indicates that we are in the symbolic realm here, in the realm of fantasy and imagining. By saying the formula four times, the Navajo uses the words 'compulsively', and tries to manipulate reality in a particular way.

I think that this unique human feature, which I indicate as the faculty of fantasy or creativity, is specific for the species. I will not investigate how it can be explained evolutionarily ¹, but I postulate that religion in all its forms and appearances can be understood by this faculty. The faculty of fantasy is a necessary condition for the emergence of the religious in my approach. Whether it is a sufficient condition, which can allow to distinguish religion from other human products, or that can help to differentiate between different religions, remains to be seen. In my approach, the comparative study of religious phenomena will help us in this respect;

Social sciences and philosophy have the audacity to study the most complex phenomena in the world: a human being, a group, let alone a group with its history are much more complex than mere biological matter (like a cell). This may be a main reason why in the past centuries we witnessed a focus on the nearby in these disciplines: psychologists study their own children or their students, sociologists study American or European groups, educationalists speak about THE school and mean the particular institution which was created in just one part of the world, philosophers speak about universal logic and they refer to Ancient Greek and European ways of thinking only, and so on. The comparative approach is at the most peripheral, if not absent in the whole endeavor. From the point of view of scientific knowledge with true universalistic pretentions, this is a severe handicap: we land up with local knowledges, in all likelihood.

2. The only group of researchers with systematic interest in other traditions is the group of anthropologists. Anthropologists have moved to the outskirts of the world to experience and describe how people live and think with different traditions of education and different intuitions about the world. The anthropologists have seen a lot, they have explained very little, and they seem to be plunged now in a deep crisis: they learned they were hardly able to report on their fellow human beings without prejudices, and they were always categorizing others within the western frame they themselves had been reared in. Anthropologists time and again claimed that the only way out of this

¹ I refer to D.T. Campbell's hierarchy of selectors in this instance (Campbell, 1974). On the other hand, the recent combination of evolutionary psychology and cognitive archeology, like in Mithen (1996) explores a similar line of thought on the nature of religion: at a certain stage in human evolution the imagination and its symbolic expressions are born. Processes of crossing between domains or modules in the brain induce more abstract and distanced thinking and hence allow for religion, art and higher knowledge processes.

catch lies in the development of a genuine comparative approach to matters (Nader, 1993). The group of colleagues who specialized in philology and culture history (and who were very active in religious studies) might have been a competitor to anthropologists in this field. However, they are so much focused on texts only, working within a frame of thought that owes so much to nineteenth century european (and hence colonial) attitudes, that they have been severely and mercilessly criticized for their 'orientalism' by the subjects they study (Said, 1979). The move towards comparison is awkward in their disciplines, as will become clear in the next chapter.

When I describe any religious practice I will invariably draw on the intuitions, biases and concepts I can master, i.e., primarily those from my own cultural tradition. This is a handicap, which I have to become conscious of (Nader's comparative consciousness is meant to be an alternative), in order to go beyond it. On the other hand, acquiring knowledge by spending considerable time and energy in another religion or tradition than my own seems to be a necessary way to overcome my initial handicap. Since each tradition has its complexity, it is hardly possible, both physically and mentally, to come to know many, let alone all religious traditions (e.g., reckoning with the 4000 traditions of anthropological classifications). This is a second handicap: by necessity, any comparative study must be limited to a deeper knowledge of only very few different traditions.

To overcome both handicaps and land up with a genuine scientific model or theory my only way is to construct a comparative approach with the following features. It should be selfcritical, in that it contextualises and screens my own insights and cultural forms as what they are: local imaginings, stemming from just one particular tradition. In the second place, I need to go beyond the boundaries of the religious field in my own tradition and consider that field as just one particular expression or format of the faculty of the religious, at the same level as and yet different from such expressions as American Indian ceremonies, Buddhist meditations or shaman travels. The comparative stance I have to come up with must allow to produce each of these formats of the religious as ever so many specifications of the same faculty of fantasy.

2. Religion: a first attempt at delineating the domain.

In order to allow for a relevant approach to the variegated domain of religious phenomena I need to indicate what is understood by 'religion' as a domain of study. I am of the conviction that the search

for definitions and battles over definitions are basically a waste of time, even if a lot of my colleagues in philosophy and the humanities still prove to think otherwise. A scientific approach, I claim, describes as precisely as possible how things work, by characterizing relevant parameters and their interrelationships, not by aiming for the utter definition of a phenomenon. Still, in order to begin to study parameters it is sensible to advance a working definition, which indicates what is roughly the field of research (and what falls outside of it).

The domain of religion all human imagining activities which attempt to symbolically fill in the relationships between humans as particular mortal beings, and the imagined reality which transcends them. These relationships are transferred from generation to generation. Phrased differently: religion is a particular way of dealing with wholeness, which transcends the spatiotemporal limitations of each particular human being.

The mention of 'symbolic' in this circumscription points to a particularity of the religious phenomena: the result of the imagining process is not testable like in knowledge, nor is it basically a matter of form or style, like in artistic creativity. These features can be claimed by a religious person, but they are not intrinsic, I suggest. The way of dealing with the world in religious matters is symbolic, which first and foremost refers to the plurality in meanings and uses of the language and activities in a religious tradition. In a later section, the notion of 'symbol' will be dealt with in detail. The human activities referred to can be diverse: ritual actions, prayers, representations, beliefs, and many others are candidates. The imagination can fill in the symbol in a variety of ways, allowing for such notions or 'things' as gods, infinity, a cyclic world, or what have you. The important point is that all of these manifestations or vehicles of the religious have a symbolic appearance.

Secondly, my focus is on human activities: I take the stand that action or activity is the basic form of human-environment relationships. Verbal actions (speech acts) and beliefs or representations are seen as particular subcategories of human action. Especially the study of nonwestern cultural and religious phenomena has taught us that the heavy emphasis on meaning and verbal actions (not to mention texts) is culture specific and largely restricted to the mediterranean traditions (Hymes, 1981).

Thirdly, religion has to do with human imagination. The particular religious forms and moulds of imagination will allow me to delineate the religious from other domains where imagination plays a

prominent role, like knowledge and art. Sometimes these domains will overlap considerably (like in the European Middle Ages), sometimes they will complement each other. A somewhat similar point of view can be seen in the latest book of another anthropologist, Raymond Firth (1996). He calls his theory 'humanistic' and encounters a similar uneasiness in the field of religious studies that I do:

'If one accepts inadequacy, aggression, evil, suffering, as part of the endowment of man, then why should one not regard imagination, creative effort, aesthetic inspiration, love, as also part of human constitution? On such a sceptical

foundation, to theo-logy succeeds anthro-po-logy-the study of God is included in the study of man.' (Firth, 1996:92).

I want to be a bit more specific and say that the study of God or the religious is part of the study of the human capacity of imagination.

Fourthly, religious activities of imagination are not invented by each individual. They are transferred through learning processes in groups and communities. Since it is the individual who is learning, it is likely that individual interpretations will alter the tradition to some extent, but the notion of an individual religion remains an oddity to my mind, because the transfer between groups and communities is an intrinsic feature of the religious domain: individual learners are always situated in contexts.

Finally, religious activities are the human means 'par excellence' to reach, express or otherwise fill in 'wholeness'.

In order to illustrate the pitfalls of this type of endeavor, I will present and criticize a main school of thought in this field, namely the phenomenologists of religion.

Chapter 2.

Old and new models.